Sorry to Disturb You

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When I first began at Holroyd's Funeral Directors my work was limited to the reception desk. I was to greet the bereaved and have them seated, with a coffee or tea if they so wished, until Mr Holroyd himself was available to see them. Mr Holroyd would guide them through to the main office at the rear of the building and take them through the various arrangements and price options available, or else relay the arrangements that had been made by the deceased in advance of their passing. There were then the obvious things to consider: the deceased's religious beliefs; the nature and location of the funeral service itself and the preference for burial or cremation; what kind of coffin (bamboo, wicker, cardboard, wool, as well as the full wood range, their fittings, and other decorative options like patination effects, photo-transfers or hand painting); as well as smaller details like the thematic detailing on the order of service brochures, headstone calligraphy, even the possibility of casting the deceased's finger prints in silver, or a cheaper metallic resin.

After observing Mr Holroyd for three months, and familiarising myself with the detail of these matters, this role was entrusted to me. From then on I spent most of my time in the office, from where I could easily be summoned by a buzzer to the reception area, though most of the time I could hear the front door open and close because of the traffic noise from the street outside. There was briefly talk of an automated bell attachment for the door, but it was decided, given the tone of the work that we undertook at Holroyd's, that this would be inappropriate.

On my office desk, beside the computer, was a framed A5 photograph of a young man in a red hard-hat and harness, standing on what appeared to be the top of very high building or else the arm of a crane. I reasoned that it was Mr Holroyd's son, Simon, who I had heard worked as an engineer in Dubai, but because I never quite felt that I had the authority to move it elsewhere, and since Mr Holroyd was not compelled to move it either, I spent the next four years in the company of this smiling stranger looking up at me, a miniature cityscape shrunken and misty in the distance behind him. Apart from the photo there was nothing to suggest that the office was not entirely my domain. I had a stack of my own business cards printed, and the radio was permanently tuned to a channel of my choosing, though this was obviously kept at a very low volume, and my options were strictly limited to classical music channels. Mr Holroyd preferred to have lunch at home and the embalmer, Jonty, spent his breaks in the cafe across the street, so I had pretty much exclusive use of the small staff kitchen with adjacent toilet situated across the square backyard, where the company's single 1997 Mercedes hearse was parked like a large, black leather shoe.

Jonty was a tall, wide man. He was not shy, but seemed permanently reluctant to speak, as if disturbing the silence of a room also disturbed a silence within him. When he did speak, it was in short, quiet bursts, and with a faint European accent that I could never quite place, nor find appropriate occasion to ask about. The only other employee was Mrs Holroyd, who would accompany her husband and Jonty on funeral days, when I was left behind to mind the parlour on my own. The division of labour at Holroyd's suited all parties. It was a small operation and easily managed if we all performed our roles efficiently. I had no desire to spend my time among the dead, and Jonty was clearly not cut out for any aspect of funeral arranging that involved talking. Mr Holroyd had also

confessed to me that while he had got quite used to dealing with dead bodies, and understood the mechanics of death, the ‘upstairs role’ as he called it, was something he found very difficult. ‘One can never find answers to the questions that grief asks of us,’ he had said early on during my training period, as if we were both stood at the edge of a well, peering down.

I admit that when I began at Holroyd’s I was terrified of death. Even so, I had fully expected to encounter corpses when I applied. My thinking was that since death is inevitable, meeting my fear in some material way would be good for me. I even said so at my interview. Popping down to the embalming rooms or passing the doorway of the small chapel of rest when a casket was open were surely occupational hazards I should expect. But the reality is that, while I saw coffins arrive and leave, during the whole four years and three months that I worked at Holroyd’s I never once saw a dead face, or hand, or even the grimly distinguishable peaks and valleys of a white sheet laid gently over a body on a table.

At first I went about my days in a continual state of anxiety, which I pretended to myself was a kind of professional hyper-preparedness, expecting to have to negotiate some horror at any turn, to be called downstairs, to be asked to help lift or hold something awful, but such moments never came. I realised I was in fact completely ‘safe’ from all that business and things improved at work enormously. I found that I was able to meet my bereaved clients with a profound calmness that I sometimes could feel emanating from me, like a steamy kind of light. I saw to the concerns of my visitors with a papal authority and gentleness, often putting them at such ease that many of them simply left all the funeral plans up to me. In these cases, I would take extra pains to include

personal touches: wildflowers instead of brutish lilies, a song lyric at the top of the order of service, green ribbons round the handles of the coffin, or a novel propped against it, a pint of Guiness, ballet shoes, any small intimate talisman I could gather from the family, so that when the day came they would feel they had planned the event themselves. I never went to the services and cremations myself, but it was regularly reported back that everything had been exactly as the departed loved one would have wished. I was excellent at my job.

Of course I remained curious about the activities elsewhere in the building, and though it was never explicitly stated that downstairs was out of bounds, so much was intimated. I still wondered about the bodies, but I was just as curious about the layout of the basement rooms. During a quiet time I might, for instance, fantasise that down the stairs lay a long marble hall, lined with row upon row of solid marble tables, each with a marble-coloured body laid out upon it, and Jonty and Mr Holroyd moving between them like a pair of exam invigilators. Once I pictured the two embalming rooms as adjoining caves, with computers mounted into the walls, their lights blinking, with Mr Holroyd stood at the controls of an industrial elevator, lowering Jonty down through a hole in the floor, and from there, presumably into a deep shaft that lead to an underground vault, with walls rich with minerals that sparkled in the light of Jonty's headlamp as he surveyed the vast interior. Rarely did I think of downstairs in a more realistic sense. The truth is I suppressed all thought of it most of the time, and could even be caught by surprise should Jonty open the door suddenly on one of his daily visits to the cafe. Then, strange as it might seem, after two or so years at Holroyd's, I forgot that the downstairs really existed.

That is until one evening, when I returned to the office to pick up my suit jacket which had my wallet in it. I had carelessly left it hanging over the back of my chair, being, as I had been, in a hurry to meet my friends at a nearby pub to watch an international football tournament, though I don't recall which teams were playing. It must have been around six thirty in the evening, Jonty and Mr Holroyd had left as usual at five thirty, and as I came into the office I heard a muttering sound. A little disturbed, I checked the desk telephone was on its hook, and it was. I went over to the radio, which was off. I tentatively went over to the door leading to the chapel of rest and found no sound coming from behind it, and so finally I approached the door to the downstairs rooms. As I crossed the floor I realised the sound was getting louder, and I began to feel very hot and struggled to breathe a little. Sweat began to form coldly on my forehead. For some reason I checked to see if my hands were shaking though I knew already that they were. Holding my right hand trembling in the air before me nevertheless confirmed that this was a real situation, and suddenly overwhelmed I let out a loud gasp, which I tried too late to suppress with my hand, because whatever it was making the sound downstairs I did not want to alert it to my presence. I stayed there, bent over, breathing deeply through my fingers for perhaps two minutes. I calmed myself with thoughts of intruders, living people, just come to steal jewellery, though I knew the personal effects were already removed. I even invented the possibility of a madly bereaved wife or husband who had broken in to see their loved one: 'One can never find answers to the questions that grief asks of us,' I told myself.

I gradually settled into my state of terror, and I recall that by this point I was also overcome with an insatiable curiosity to locate the exact source of the muttering. In one impulsive, swift move I walked over to the door and opened it. There were six, then – wait, yes – seven different voices, each clear and

distinct from one another. They spoke in a flat timbre and in a way that sounded officious. I felt appalled by the sound they made but leaned my head into the stairwell to listen further, my heart pounding in my head. The seven voices spoke as if they were reading from the same dry script, though each was at a slightly different stage, as if singing in the round. They were saying: *I'm sorry to disturb you, but our records show that you have recently been involved in an accident*. When they reached the end of the phrase, they began again. *I'm sorry to disturb you, but our records show that you have recently been involved in an accident*, each voice falling upon the words like waves at the edge of a lake, *sorry, disturb, records, recently, accident*. I wanted to thread a needle through their chorus, to pull the thread tight and gather their voices into one whole.

I felt no urge to run. Hearing them apologise for their intrusion, and then solemnly offering the knowledge that they possessed it struck me that the dead truly did understand the nature of accidents; they knew the cruelty of chance, mishappenings, the small but devastating errors that unravel the crucial text of things. I realised that my hand on the door frame was now aching intensely from the pressure of leaning so far into the stairwell. I must have been there for several minutes. The pain took me out of the trance I had fallen into, and adjusting myself, I listened again more objectively. There were three different men's voices, and three women, one of which sounded quite young, and oh, no, a child, but yes, there was a child down there, the Robinson boy who had fallen from a tree, a real tragedy just last week. Was that his voice now, *Sorry to disturb you, but our records show* . . . with an assertiveness about the statement, as if politely informing a teacher that yesterday's date was still written on the blackboard? The intimacy, the innocence of the Robinson boy's voice among that party of speakers made me feel that I was intruding on something sacred, important, that I had overstayed my welcome. I calmly withdrew back into the

office and gently shut the door behind me. I was shaken, but now felt a lightness, a kind of terrifying joy; I had witnessed a miracle!

Outside the summer air was warm and thick, the traffic was casual, intermittent, and the sun had not yet begun setting. I felt a strong urge to be in the company of the living, so I decided to return to the pub and my friends at the football. I needed to reassure myself that I had not gone mad, that some floor in my mind had not finally given way to the weight of something dark and long repressed, which is how it felt. The pub was just two streets away so I ran, giddily. I interacted normally with my friends, who remarked on my reappearance that I seemed a little spaced out. They were concerned with whether I had found my wallet, my jacket, enquiries which felt like vague gusts of air passing through my head, but I was very pleased to see them and to be among them. I ordered five or six drinks over the course of the evening, and as I drank and stared at the television, its luminescent green rectangle of shifting light abstracting, love came home to me, for the first time, I think, in years. It dawned on me that, born into a world already peopled, I had somehow never fully discovered the spectacular, unlikely miracle of it, the peopled world, or perhaps my sense of it had been dulled along the way. But stood at my particular intersection within the traffic of furious life and living passing by, I once again came upon the feeling that this miracle was love – yes, that's exactly what it was.

I was ready with an excuse to stay behind and work late the next evening. At around 6 o'clock the chorus of muttering struck up and I quickly moved over to my spot at the top of the stairs to listen. I took the liberty of sitting on the top step, and leaned forward with my head in my hands to concentrate. *I'm sorry to disturb you, but our records show that you have recently been involved in an*

accident they chimed, the final voice ending as the first, the leader, a woman's voice I realised, began the cycle again.

After an hour or so of this, something changed, the timbre of the voices shifted, as if excited by something, and sure enough the lead voice said suddenly, *I'm sorry to hear that is the case, but please be reassured that our team are on hand to ensure that you receive the full compensation that you are entitled to,* and immediately the other voices followed suit, repeating the same new phrase. *We have every confidence that your claim will be successful and of course our services are provided free of charge to you as the claimant. We are most sorry to hear that. We must stress that this service is free and that the compensation could in this case be worth pursuing. Well this may be so but please allow me to . . . We are sorry to hear that . . . yes of course . . . We are sorry not to be able to help you further with this matter*. There followed a silence. My whole body throbbed with excitement. Their offer had been refused, but by who? There was no voice replying to them, or not one that I could hear. And who in their right mind would refuse them? Had they not heard the voices insist that the claim was sure to be successful, that the compensation would be worth pursuing? I felt sad. I felt rejected on their behalf, that their kindness had been swept away. And then the voices began again, *I'm sorry to disturb you, but our records show that you have recently been involved in an accident*, and calm was restored to me as I listened to the chant go round and round, seeking another point of connection, seven searchlights moving over the sea.

For the next three weeks I stayed late at work to sit and listen at top of the stairs. The cast of voices changed with each new arrival and departure downstairs, though I resisted trying to reattach their living names to them. It was clear their

characters were not *carried over* to this new state, that these speakers were not the people they had been, but were now something like an extension of their shared purpose. Besides, it was to this purpose that I was also committed; I was desperate for them to make a connection, to find a willing recipient of the compensation they offered. I never once heard a voice reply to them, and they never had their offer to pursue a claim accepted. I was so desperate that once or twice I found myself on the verge of calling out to them, *I am here, can you help me?* But each time my voice refused, the way the mind refuses to jump into water when the distance is too high, or the temperature uncertain. Afterwards I gathered my nerves around the facts: that I had so far only been permitted by whatever force gave voice to the dead to hear them; that I had not been invited to reply; that surely doing so would only risk putting an end to their speaking, breaking the miracle, or perhaps forcing it elsewhere; that whatever my desire I had not, to my knowledge, recently been involved in an accident, so it was not to me they spoke. To keep the miracle near meant being a witness to it, and nothing more. It was my duty. This was the contract I agreed to by my silence. Within a week I was so committed to my task that I rarely slipped away until the early hours, returning home to my bed for a few hours of blank sleep, my morning alarm, and a shower so dazed that I barely remembered to wash myself.

One morning I woke to the clatter of the parlour front door. Mr Holroyd appeared in the office doorway soon after, looking concerned. I quickly made up an excuse. I had developed a drinking problem. There were, I found myself saying, issues with my home life, my accommodation situation was unstable and I had been forced to spend the night in the office. He was clearly displeased, though sympathetic, making me a coffee, telling me to go and wash my face. He had noticed I was having ‘a tough time’ recently, he kept saying it,

‘a tough time’, as if my life was the crust of a loaf of bread, as if I had been having difficulty chewing it. My work of late, he said, had not been of the high standards I had set myself.

Then two days later, having been forced to abandon my evening vigils in the stairwell because of the constant surveillance of Mr Holroyd, who had taken my key and now always made sure that I left before him, I realised it was time to cease my employment. In truth I was relieved. I knew that I had become completely obsessed with the cold-calling dead. I saw that. I had isolated myself from the rest of the world. I had become detached from the feeling of evening falling about my shoulders, the weight of another day healing up as I turned my key in the door of my flat. The whole experience had, in truth, taken it out of me, and as much as I wished to hear the dead speak again, I was not yet so mad as to try and explain what had been happening, or otherwise risk a more desperate means of resuming my nocturnal habits.

Mr Holroyd thanked me for my service. Wished me well. Even Jonty felt compelled to voice that he was sad to see me go, but that he understood that ‘change can be a good thing’, and as I left work on that last evening Mr Holroyd put his hand on my shoulder, its warmth penetrating my shirt, the first time, I think, that he had touched me, and he assured me in a low, sturdy voice that he would provide me with excellent references, that when this difficult period in my life was over he was confident I would get back on my feet again, would find richer, happier times on the other side of whatever darkness had taken me of late. And he stressed, with a great sincerity, the importance of accepting help when it was offered, that there was no shame in it, and that it was, he admitted without emotional restraint, perhaps the only thing that truly connected people

in this life, the offering and accepting of help. And of course, by that time I understood what he meant.